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Dinner at Betty's: Best of the Riviera Nayarit

By Anne Z. Cooke Tribune News Service (TNS)
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SAN BLAS, Mexico — Does your favorite celebrity chef spring to mind when you're feeling puckish, clicking through the channels and looking for a cooking show? No?

The name "Betty Vasquez" didn't ring my bell, either. But when I searched the internet for "Mexico famous chefs," I found her in San Blas, in the state of Nayarit, north of Puerto Vallarta.

Later on, when Steve, my husband, suggested that we spend one of our Puerto Vallarta vacation days driving north along the Riviera Nayarit, I agreed, as long as it included dinner at Betty's, in San Blas.

Until then, I hadn't realized that the border between the two states, Jalisco and Nayarit, is just north of the airport, at the Rio (river) Ameco. Beyond the border you're in wonderland, on one of Mexico's last, unspoiled tropical coasts.

Still a bit off the grid, it's a glorious refuge for wildlife, with hundreds of empty sand beaches, clear-water streams and mangrove swamps thick with birds, fish, crocodiles, small mammals and even linx-like cats.

Driving there we'd pass a dozen little villages, from Nuevo Vallarta and Flamingoes to Bucerias, Huanacastle, Punta Mita, Sayulita, San Francisco, Lo de Marcos, Guayabitos and Chacala, before ever reaching San Blas.

But it wasn't that far, according to Sonia, the concierge at our hotel, the Miraval, in Nuevo Vallarta. "San Blas is a three-hour drive, lots of curves, but scenic," she said.

"Take your toothbrush and stay overnight. Then you'll have time to stop along the way in Bucerias, Sayulita and San Pancho. Everybody swims in the ocean and you can get lunch."

We left Puerto Vallarta early the next morning heading north on Highway 200, following the coastline, passing miles of

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Steve, who'd done some research, wondered whether San Blas, now a sleepy farm town, was the same port of call where, from the 16th century on, Spain's treasure ships, returning from the Philippines, first made landfall, stopping to take on fresh water.

Later, in 1767, when Spain decided to push her empire north, as far as Alaska, San Blas became an official naval port. It was here that Father Junipero Serra, the Spanish priest, and a company of soldiers embarked, sailing north to build California's missions.

Our first stop, in Buceritas, was just long enough to explore the expansive arts and crafts street market, on Lazaro Cardenas Avenue, and for a 10-minute swim in the ocean, a block away. As we were leaving, two friendly Canadians in bathing suits, there for the winter season, stopped to urge us to join them. "It's marvelous," they said.

The next stop was the Four Seasons and the W Hotel, for a look at each resort's very special lobby art, including paintings, pottery and Huichol beaded figures and murals.

A few miles on we reached Sayulita, an art colony and one of Mexico's historic "magic towns." With galleries, shops, cafes, coffee shops, cottages and sheds crowded onto every buildable inch, its cobblestone lanes were as boisterous as they were colorful. Joining mobs of shoppers, mostly Mexican vacationers, we found a beachside cafe and ordered ice tea.

Eventually we reached San Pancho — San Francisco, officially — a place I'll remember because we sat on the central plaza and watched the iguanas in a tree, then spotted a street artist who sold me a primitive painting. "My father paints all of these," he said, showing me a half-dozen different scenes. "He makes the paper, too."

Colored flags strung between the rooftops — a recent trend, it seems — led the way to the ocean and Las Palmas Restaurant on the beach, where we sat under an umbrella, watched the surfers and ordered lunch. Lingering over a platter with six kinds of tacos and a couple of pints, an hour ticked away before we noticed it. By the time we reached San Blas the sun was leaning westward, bathing the ocean in a silvery sheen.

As we circled the plaza, passing mothers pushing babies in strollers, old men playing checkers, and skinny kids chasing around the fountain, I caught a whiff of barbecued pork. A wave of nostalgia made my heart thump, and I felt like a fifth-grader again, traveling with my parents.

San Blas, I could see, wouldn't be on the average traveler's bucket list. But simplicity is its charm. If you've seen Alfonso Cuarón's film "Roma," a story of ordinary people coping with life in Mexico in the 1970s, you'll know what I mean.

As we pulled into the gas station, the attendant, a tall guy in cowboy boots, ambled over to man the pump.

"If you want to taste real Nayarit cooking," he said, spotting the tourist map on the dashboard, "try the Hotel Garza Canela, that way," he said, pointing toward the ocean. "They have a restaurant there, and a pool."

"Is that Betty Vasquez's restaurant?" He wasn't sure. Heading for the hotel, we booked a room for the night, and asked about the restaurant, the El Delfin.

"It's right there, across the patio," Rosa, behind the desk, said as she pointed the way.

Stepping outside I realized that we were behind a wall in a colonial-style hacienda, with leafy trees shading a spacious patio and garden with several other buildings and a swimming pool.

“My father loved those trees,” said the lady at the restaurant door, her brown hair twisted into a bun. “He spent hours out there, weeding and watering. Come in, I’m Betty,” she said smiling.

I was so thrilled to meet her that I grinned like an idiot, but she shook hands and looked pleased. “And you’ve come all this way, just to eat here?” she said. “I am so glad you’re here,” she said, showing us to a table.

“What do you think?” I asked Steve, after she’d donned an apron and disappeared into the kitchen. “Worth two stars?”

Twenty minutes later we compared our dinners. “This is delicious,” he said, sharing a taste of baked pork loin, with a fruit-and-chipotle sauce. “Is yours the curried shrimp?” he asked. “Am I tasting coconut milk?”

We were scanning the dessert menu when she returned with coffee, and since it was early and the restaurant was still empty, she sat down to talk.

“Tell me, will you be here long?” she said. “I loved Paris when I studied at the Cordon Bleu, but this is our family home. My roots are here. Do you have time to tour around? There’s a lot to see.”

I got out my pad and pen. “What else should we see?” Scribbling, I made a list. Visit the fort on San Basilio hill. Look out at the town and ocean view. See the big white rock. The Huichol people call it Tatei Haramara, the sea goddess. Walk through the old church, La Nuestra Senora del Rosario, near the fort. Swim at Las Islitas beach, on Matanchen Bay. Bring bug spray. Don’t miss the highlight, the naturalist-guided boat tour on Santiago River estuary in La Tovar National Park.

“You know,” she said, pausing to think, “Why don’t I show you around? I’m going out of town, but I’m free in the morning. We’re filming the next season of “MasterChef Mexico” and I have to be there. I’m one of the show’s three judges.”

After our tour with Betty, we took the guided boat ride through La Tovar’s estuary, with naturalist Francisco Garcia. Gliding from shadowy mangroves to sunlit freshwater pools, seeing rare birds and strange trees, was wonderful and enchanting.

Betty was right. The boat ride was almost as memorable as dinner at the El Delfin. And as always, the best adventure was the one I didn’t plan.

THE NITTY GRITTY

Touring the Riviera Nayarit: see www.rivieranayarit.com

Hotel Garza Canela, www.garzacanela.com: rooms or suites for up to six, US \$90-\$275.

Entrees at El Delfin restaurant: US \$10-\$25

Driving from Puerto Vallarta: National Hwy 200 North to signs to Tepic, then State 16 to Zacualpan and San Blas.

From Puerto Vallarta: 156 km., 79 miles, 3 hours by car

From Mazatlan: 283 km., 176 miles

From Guadalajara: 261 km., 162 miles, three hours by car

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Canceled Truman overhaul puzzles many

By Bruce G. Wilson
The news that President Donald Trump's administration has canceled a major overhaul of the Truman Library and Museum has puzzled many people. The project, which was announced in 2017, was intended to modernize the facility and improve the visitor experience. However, the decision to cancel the project has left many wondering why the administration would do so. Some speculate that the project was too expensive or that it was not a priority for the current administration. Others believe that the project was canceled because it was not in line with the administration's agenda. The cancellation has also raised questions about the future of the Truman Library and Museum.

Mueller's report: Trump didn't conspire with Russia

By Michael Sauter
The report by Special Counsel Robert Mueller found that President Donald Trump did not conspire with Russia to interfere in the 2016 election. The report also found that Trump did not obstruct justice. However, the report did find that Trump's attorney, Michael Cohen, conspired with Russia to interfere in the election. The report also found that Trump's son, Donald Trump Jr., conspired with Russia to interfere in the election. The report is a landmark document in the investigation into the 2016 election.



City is reshaping public housing

By Tom Ichniowski
The City of Norfolk is reshaping its public housing program. The city is investing in new housing projects and is also working to improve existing housing. The city is also working to address the needs of low-income families and is providing financial assistance to help them pay their rent. The city is also working to improve the quality of its public housing and is providing better services to its residents. The city is committed to providing safe and affordable housing for all of its residents.

Strawberry season may be coming early in Hampton Roads

By Tom Ichniowski
The strawberry season in the Hampton Roads area may be coming early. This is due to the unusually warm weather that has been experienced in the region. The warm weather has caused the strawberries to ripen earlier than usual. This is good news for strawberry growers in the area, as it means they can start selling their fruit earlier in the season. However, it also means that the strawberry season may be shorter than usual. The warm weather has also caused some damage to the strawberry plants, which could affect the overall yield. Despite these challenges, the strawberry season in the Hampton Roads area is looking promising.

UPHELD: THE QUALITY OF NORTOLAN

By Tom Ichniowski

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services has upheld the quality of the NORTOLAN program. This is a major victory for the program, as it means that the program is still in good standing. The program provides essential services to low-income families and is a vital part of the state's social safety net. The decision to uphold the program is a testament to the hard work of the program's staff and the support of the community. The program will continue to provide high-quality services to all of its participants.

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